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AUTHOR Papay, Twila Yates
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ABSTRACT

An instructor, released on sabbatical from September 1991 through July 1992, embarked on a journey, not as a tourist but rather as a traveller seeking the enlightenment of exotic places. After reading travel literature and devising a plan, with computer in tow, the journey began. A correlation between Thoreau's assertion that he had "travelled widely in Concord" and the instructor's own conviction that "travelling" does not count unless it goes deep as well as broad began to surface. As a writing teacher the instructor had watched 20 years worth of students write themselves into wholeness. The instructor also noted the self-healing power of keeping a journal. By blending writing and travelling the instructor is brought to a new place. Sometimes the writing became more meaningful than the reality, or maybe, the interior journey outstripped the exterior. (TB)

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For the Sake of the Writing to Come: Uncovering Uncommon Realities

So here I am: riding along on the broad back of Durga Kali, comprehending for the first time the meaning of that stately word "lumbering." I'm savoring the word, tasting it, my delight in the feel of the elephant's body beneath me permeating all else. Will I see a Bengal tiger? An Indian cuckoo or a delicate field deer? Somehow, I just don't care. Deep in the earthtones of Royal Chitwan National Park, I am immersed in tall tough elephant grass, tender in its bright greenness. . .swaying high and surveying the Nepalese jungle. Then we plunge down, down the whole slope of the great elephant body like a plane of the ecliptic realigning. Steeped in grass rising above me, I gaze deep down from the high wide back rippling beneath me. The source of mysterious rustlings emerges through parting fronds just ahead: a huge white rhino, her hide actually a series of grey armorlike plates. Closer I am to her than ever I should be in a zoo. Behind her stamps a massive baby. Ah, the moment.

And insistent. . .at the back of my consciousness. . .oh, savor this to write it tonight. No, not just write "about" it, but to write the elephant moving, to render myself aboard the swaying, flowing, rippling upsloped, down-slanted plane of Durga Kali's back. And sound and color rioting around me, taste and smell dispersed. Clearly foremost for me then was the shifting plane of gravity, myself upon the elephant who turned sweetly at the bidding of her driver. I see her trunk come up and touch his face, then curl back down to check the path she weaves in forward motion. Laughing, I feel her yearning for the water as she lumbers gently

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down another slope, then lowers her bulk gingerly, squarely into the middle of the river, I clinging squealy to the shifting wooden frame of a defining saddle strapped across her broad back.

But wait! Am I writing or doing? Riding or being? Almost the two impinge upon each other, writing and travelling the interactive axes of my being. On Durga Kali's back I weave the magic imaginings of my writing. Before the computer that evening I feel the flowing muscles of her back. Calling forth the words, the emotions, the intensity flowing through me in the ripe hours of becoming, I allow them to inform the text taking shape beneath the rapid movement of my fingers.

And then to bed, where I again am riding Durga Kali, mounting the surge of energy as I flow deep into othertime, sleeping as I frame the words to shape tomorrow's travel. Do I travel to write? Or do I write to travel? Are not they both ways of defining my being?

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Let me tell you about a journey, not as a tourist following Fodor and snapping photos, though I've done that, but rather as a traveller, seeking the enlightenment of exotic places touching me. From September 1991 through July 1992, released on my first sabbatical, I read up on travel literature, devised a plan with my husband, and set off with my computer. In my reading I began to sense some correlation between Thoreau's assertion that he had "travelled widely in Concord" and my own conviction that <u>travelling</u> doesn't count unless it goes deep as well as broad. As a writing

teacher I had watched twenty years worth of students write themselves into wholeness. I had even engaged in the self-healing power of writing in my own recent journaling. Perhaps on this journey I sought a complex and ready serenity not so easily shaken by adversity. I wanted to touch the earth in a new way, and thereby circle back to myself. As a traveller I wanted to dance lightly across the continents, leaving few marks, giving opportunity for those places to stamp their benign influences upon me. The more I could inhale this earth's diversity, the more I might enhance my own progression in being. And the more richness I might offer those students whose writing into wholeness I am encharged with.

The vehicle would be my journal. Writing lets me examine experience from multiple perspectives, rather like the eye of the dragonfly. So in writing about the journey as I made it, I meandered widely, focusing the light of curiosity or reason on other ways of being. Thus, rocked gently in the arms of the seas, I glided around South America, contemplating new constellations and new imaginings. Moving very far away in time to the child in me who first heard of Malaya, I wrote:

> **Long Ago and Far Away**
>
> Once a very long time ago--I believe it was 1955 and I was nine years old--I read in geography about a far-off land named Malaya, where they drew rubber from trees and mined some tin, but mostly the people were farmers living in poor little thatched hut bamboo villages, eating fruit and rice on the edges of their jungle homes. And I remember so little of that long ago time, but I do recall how very far away those people seemed, remote and pristine and safe from reality I supposed in their jungle world. Tonight I shall sleep my second night in the newer land of Malaysia (re-named in 1963), and that

> little girl reading her geography text like a fairytale dream of the otherworld seems very remote to me indeed.
>
> Hard to believe, sitting here in the Cameron Highlands (named for the British man who supposedly "discovered" the place in 1885, though the Semai, the original jungle people whose descendants we visited today have been here since ancient times and still number over 2000). But yesterday afternoon we walked the streets of Penang, having flown in over the great causeway, third largest bridge in the world, through deep storm clouds.

After pages on urban Malaysia and temple customs, my journal moves on to some exploration of life in the Cameron Highlands:

> But here we did find faraway enchantment, a gigantic waterfall (Lata Iskandar) tearing down several levels over a wild hillside, the whole maddened by the rains and leaping up with lovely sprays in the brief sunshine that emerged just for our visit. The drive itself up over spectacular mountain scenery, with great drops down into wild jungle and a winding road up through tea plantations was a joy. Here there are massive vegetable and flower gardens, great stands of fruit trees, magnificent butterflies (a huge black one with green on the wings called the Rajah Brooke Birdwing), a strawberry farm, an orchid plantation. En route we stopped to visit an aborigine village, a little collection of bamboo huts, simple broad leaves lashed together against bamboo poles, with thatching on top. There is no furniture. The people cook mostly outdoors, vegetables and whatever squirrel and monkey meat the men gather each night when they head up the road into the jungle with baskets, knives, and poison arrowed blowguns (the poison made from the root of the ipoh tree). The children attend local schools, dropping out after a year or two, to follow the same traditional lifestyle, the one I read about in the textbook so long ago, so far away. I had my picture taken with a very pretty pale-faced little girl who gazed at me solemnly, then smiled when I thanked her. And she never knew how once I'd read of her country, her very way of life, as if I'd been reading about the far side of the moon. How very long ago, how far away, that girl who read her texts and never knew how real this life can be, or how T.S. Eliot had written that humanity cannot quite bear too much reality.

The blending of the two, writing and travelling, has brought me to a new place. Only in travelling could I have sought so wide, so deep, for my connections to the old earth before the complications of the world set in. Only in writing could I have defined

and given meaning to that contact, setting in context the values by which I define myself.

At the heart of writing, reading, travelling lie a mysterious cycle. When I travel I read; when I read I write; when I write I travel. When I come back, reading the journal enlivens and gives meaning to what I have seen and pondered over. But in that original writing. . .ah, rare paradox. . .lay the essence of living. For my travels themselves were illuminated by the mere prospect of the writing ahead each evening. Thus, I saw with a more profound vision, heard the music in a richer tone, felt a deeper fascination with the people. . .all for the sake of the writing yet to come, the meaning-making of what I had lived each place, each day, each experience.

***

Let me illustrate. Again and again it happened, as in the elephant safari, this intense awareness of the moment as I planned to write about it. Near the coast of France, under the vivid blue skies of Brittany, we came without warning upon the Alignments of Carnac.

Surprise. Laughing joyful incredulous surprise. That was my first response. . .stunned into silence by the Alignments. What could they mean? Faced with the tantalizing, arcane menhirs, great stones taller than myself aligned in eleven long rows down a space somewhat larger than a football field, I could only giggle. All the questions, the reading, the pondering. . .connections to the

Stone Circles of Great Britain and the paleolithic stone temples of Malta. . .all that intellectual activity would come later.

How would I capture this? Beyond the laughter, the first thought was for. . .my journal. And so I contemplated the menhirs, anticipating the act of writing, intensely aware of my sense of awe. Then came the connections that would lead me to bookshops and . . .when darkness fell. . .back to my computer. And here is what I wrote:

Of the Savage and the Stones

> I did some reflecting earlier on the pull it seems to me that wildness has. Likewise, I examined my fascination for the megalithic monuments, the tug of the past in stone. The fascination of the great stones draws us onward, into greater mysteries, deeper dreaming. I'm wondering now if the two, the stones and the wilderness, somehow intersect.
>
> It's true there's a pleasure in cultivated gardens; some people tend their souls in tending flowers. And yet I love my fuchsias rising up wildly along the road. And what of the joys of those blackberries casually picked along country lanes where they simply uprose unbidden? Yes, I like the jumbled tangle of a woods untended, a hedge unclipped, a tree choosing its own passage toward the sun. I like other kinds of savagery too.

After four pages on the ancient stones of Brittany and the Cote Sauvage, I conclude:

> Of stones and savage places. In the Coleridge sense, enchanted. The two come clearly together. In seeking out wildness, open space, the uncivilized, privacy of time and place in nature, we seek our deeper selves, our unadorned persons. We seek to understand relationships, to know ourselves in plain terms, as people. In Eamon Slater's terms, we seek past time, a solution to our post-modern dilemma, a way out of the meaningless maze of uncertainty. Perhaps it is reassuring to find the neolithic peoples, so alien to us, engaged in the same deep searching, creating their patterns, making meaning in the face of the inscrutable.
>
> For me I love the texture of the stone, its permanence. I love the beauty of the rough wild edges set untouched upright into the untrammeled earth. But I confess I love the mystery as well, the eerie realization that herein lies a

> truth I cannot know, a way of seeing I can but dimly surmise. And I love the sense of passion working through intelligence, a need to express, however foreign that expression may ultimately be to me. After all, these stones were not placed there for me. I'm only the unsuspected beneficiary.
>
> Whatever those alignments represent, their presence through time is a charmed miracle, a reminder of spirit and a will to beauty. But perhaps I love them best as an expression of the love of wildness, the recognition of the power of nature-hewn stone to voice the silent passions of our lives.

***

Because I wrote a journal, then, I went deep in the living as well. Reflecting profoundly upon the meaning of the moment, I exposed more fully my interior life. My writing encapsulates me in new ways of being found at the ends of the earth.

Yet as I wrote in many places (homes and hotels and ship decks, steps of airports and a camp dining room), so too I wrote for many purposes. Hints for would-be travellers and observations for those, like myself, who are somewhat disabled, vie with notes of great discoverie and subtle disappointments. But mostly, I wrote for the traveller's interior life. Looking inward and outward simultaneously, I found ways back to the simplicity of life. Sometimes the writing took on a higher reality than the living, as when my fingers ached for the keyboard, the ideas bubbling ahead of my time.

In Xi'an[shee-on], for example, I sat out the long eight hours of our oft-heralded departure on a chartered military plane bound for Chongqing. Scrunched miserably on some dank concrete steps, I was nonetheless aware of the cleaning staff lining the tiers above me, watching anxiously and calling out in melodiously accented excitement to passing friends, pointing at the mad western lady

painstakingly writing in Western script just below them. Amused and bemused, I tried not to block out their fascination, even as I savored the delay which brought the first opportunity to catch up on my reflections from Beijing. Out of power and recording by hand what my husband would later transcribe, I was transported, strolling once more across the dragon's back of the Great Wall, quite surprised by the sudden intrusions of fellow passengers who sought me out, urging me to include the trials of our long delay in my journal. And I would shake my head to clear it, lost somewhere on long interior pathways, caught midway between writing and being.

Sometimes the writing became more meaningful than the reality, or maybe, the interior journey outstripped the exterior. I recall the long early morning hours of gliding up the Amazon, still awaiting that anticlimactic moment of entry. The mysterious interior journey into the heart of unknown adventure echoing through my own interior, is perhaps moretantalizing in the journal than was the outward morning of our passing. Consider what I wrote:

> "And We Had Entered the Great River, But We Knew It Not."
>
> There was a serenity about this morning time--a quiet sense of intense and sensitive waiting overhanging, enveloping us. We strolled the deck, while the great mystery of being unfolded just before us. And on we sailed. Into the heart of the unknown, surface-known, the face of inscrutable heat and humidity--an intense being, palpable, but somehow beyond my ability to contemplate. I surrendered. . .or transcended. I simply felt.
>
> I rose before 5:00 to be on deck when we entered the mouth of the Amazon, though entering a two-hundred-mile-wide river mouth with an island the size of Switzerland is hardly a phenomenon easy to note. A little before 6:00 I wrote this on a postcard as we sat watching the river:

> The first thing I noticed was the water. By the light of the ship before I slept, it was still vivid blue. Here on deck at 5:00 am I looked out on a brown-black sea of fine silt. We're approaching the mouth of the Amazon! I'm watching for river islands marking one channel in a two-hundred-mile-wide mouth. Whenever I thought of this journey, it was this moment I dreamed of. Now I've been on deck an hour awaiting--something--in this charmed moment of quiet. What is the Amazon? Perhaps the heart of some primordial mystery.
>
> To be honest, the journal picks up, the first thing I noticed, I now remember, was not the water, but the change in movement. At 2:30 when I awoke we were rocking. A little after 3:00 we were not. I felt the movement forward, but the sea beneath me was gone. This was confirmed when lecturer Loren McIntyre explained the vibrations which awoke me shortly afterwards. They shook the ship and rattled a number of unidentified objects looming up out of my sleep. These were caused by our passing over a sandbar at about 30 feet (the ship's draft). This sandbar lies at the lightship, about eighty miles (I believe) out to sea, perhaps as good a marker as any of the Amazon's mouth. [And why is there so much debris? someone asked him. "Because it's been raining in the Andes." Amazing.]
>
> I felt tuned to a high pitch in this early morning atmosphere. It was quiet, nearly silent, on deck, almost the morning of creation, though eventually some magnificent black-wing-tipped white wood storks flew out to follow us for a while. As far as we could see on either side, before and aft, the silted water spread and rolled gently, touched by the wind and, after 6:00, the rising sun which turned the brown water to bronze.

It seemed to me there was a seamlessness to journal-writing and living, a complex sense of being, enhanced by inconclusiveness.

Moreover, my journal perceptions are constantly shifting, converted by the discoveries of the moment, weighted by the reflections of yesterday, buoyed up by the questions of the next morning. What I could I captured in writing. But what was omitted, never noticed, forgotten in the swift rush of the clock? What is real? Surely not my journal, that record of things past, gone and ended, unmade. I read it now as in dreamtime, pondering what was, cease-

lessly astounded by what I recorded, wondering what it will be like to go back. The chapter "Romancing Orvieto," noting our disappointment in comparison to a former visit, offers strong proof that what I see and remember is not there. Even when I know what I saw hasn't changed in perspective, with return I have changed, and my memory's hazed. The entry "Haze Over Asia" I wrote flying back toward Australia, but was the haze not primarily a mist in my head?

Yet even reading as in dreamtime, I find myself brought to a new place, a quiet acceptance of who I am in an opulent earth. I set out in search of new wholeness, a comprehension and connection to old ways of knowing new things, a method of finding my own place in the extraordinary matrix of global diversity. What I found was new faith--deeper loving of this earth I inhabit, comic vision, a happy sort of acceptance, serene acknowledgment of the ways I've defined my life's work. I wrote the journal as a model of wholeness. . .the traveller as extension of place. I wanted to comprehend and illustrate how deeply the place can leave its mark. So the end was bound up in the journal from the beginning. Now as I read it I travel again.

And here I am: riding along on the broad back of Durga Kali, comprehending for the first time the meaning of that stately word "lumbering." I'm savoring the word, my delight in the feel of the elephant's body beneath me permeating all else. In writing I savor that moment; the circle is complete.

Twila Yates Papay
Rollins College
Winter Park, FL